

By the Kansas Historical Society

## Kate Richards O'Hare The First Lady of American Socialism

Kate Richards O'Hare grew up near Ada in Ottawa County. O'Hare and her family felt that through hard work they would be able to have a good life. O'Hare described life on the farm.

*Days that laid the foundation of my whole life, gave me health and strength and love of freedom . . .*

– Kate Richards O'Hare,  
"How I Became a Socialist Agitator," October 1908

In 1887 Kansas farmers suffered a severe drought. The drought and the high cost of supplies led to increasing debt. Many farmers were forced to leave their farms. The Richards family was among these. The family moved to Kansas City where her father was fortunate enough to find an hourly wage job. It was at this time that O'Hare first saw severe poverty. O'Hare recalled:

*The poverty, the misery, the want . . . men trampling the streets by day . . . [the] pinching poverty of the workless workers and the frightful, stinging piercing cold of that winter in Kansas City will always stay with me . . .*

– Kate Richards O'Hare, "How I Became a Socialist Agitator," October 1908

O'Hare's father eventually opened his own machine shop. O'Hare convinced his foreman to let her train as an apprentice. She wrote about her experience working in a man's world.

*For more than four years I worked at the forge and lathe and bench side by side with some of the best mechanics of the city . . . The work was most congenial and I learned for the first time what absorbing joy there can be in labor, if it be a labor that one loves.*

– Kate Richards O'Hare, "How I Became a Socialist Agitator," October 1908

Working in the machine shop introduced O'Hare to the world of unions. She came to believe that trade unions were vital to the welfare of the working man. At the same time O'Hare joined the Socialist Party. Socialist editor and activist J. A. Wayland became her mentor. Both Richards and Wayland moved to Girard. There she attended a training school for Socialist workers. Wayland built his Socialist newspaper, *Appeal to Reason*, into one of the largest weekly publications in the nation with a circulation of more than 150,000.





O'Hare became a regular contributor to the paper. Her articles focused on the plight of the worker. One article was about a wealthy woman in New York City who ordered a hat for her daughter. The mother demanded that the hat not be made from the bodies of dead birds as was the fashion. The woman insisted, "No life should be sacrificed for the hat."

O'Hare wrote about the people who made the woman's hat.

Toiling slowly up the stairs I came upon Roselie, the little Italian girl who sat next to me at the long work table ... Overtaking her I noticed she clung to the banister with one hand and held a crumpled mitten to her lips with the other. As we entered the cloakroom she noticed my look of sympathy and weakly smiling said in broken English: "Oh, so cold! It hurta me here," and she laid her hand on her throat. Seated at the long table the forelady brought a great box of the most exquisite red satin roses, and glancing sharply at Roselie said: "I hope you're not sick this morning; we must have these roses and you are the only one who can do them; have them ready by noon."

Soon a busy hum filled the room and in the hurry and excitement of my work I forgot Roselie until a shrill scream from the ... [woman] across the table reached me and I turned in time to see Roselie fall forward among the flowers. As I lifted her up the hot blood spurted from her lips, staining my hands and spattering the flowers as it fell. There was a stir of excitement for a few moments and then the police ambulance clanged up to the door, and the surgeon raised Roselie from my arms and carried her away ... The next morning I entered the grim, gray portals of Bellevue Hospital and asked for Roselie. "Roselie Randazzo," the clerk read from the great register. "Roselie Randazzo, seventeen; lives East Fourth street; taken from Marks' Artificial Flower Factory; hemorrhage; died 12:30 p.m. ... "

I saw again the gentle womanly face of the girl who would not wear the body of a dead bird and yet all unknowingly was wearing fabric woven from children's lives, dyed with the heart's blood of women, formed with the heart strings of the human race. But she does not know! She does not know ...

The work of every woman who does know is to tell the story of lives sacrificed until none can say, "I did not know."

—"He Counteth the Sparrow's Fall," *Appeal to Reason*, November 19, 1904

In 1902 Kate Richards married Frank O'Hare. They began a career of lecturing for the Socialist Party across the nation. As the war in Europe built in intensity, Socialists campaigned to keep America out of war. In an article in a Socialist newspaper, O'Hare wrote of the need for health care for many of America's children. Why, she asked, would America ignore its children to prepare for a foreign war?

... your government spends hundred of millions of dollars we create each year, but not one cent to save these ... wasted lives ... Last year we spent \$38,994,075 for new battleships and ammunition wasted in target practice. For this sum fifteen thousand physicians might be hired by the government.

– Kate Richards O'Hare, *National Rip-Saw*

In May 1917 Congress passed the Espionage Act, placing limitations on public speeches. No one could say things that might lead to military disobedience or obstruct conscription (drafting young men to serve in the military). O'Hare responded in this way:

*In all modern history, there has never been such a flagrant violation of the very spirit of free speech. Not even in Russia under the bloody czars were such brutal laws enacted to curb natural expression of opinions.*

–“Farewell Address of Kate Richards O'Hare,” *Oakland World*, April 25, 1919

Despite the Act, O'Hare continued to cross the nation speaking against the war. By June 1917 she had given speeches in more than 70 towns. When she took the stage in Bowman, North Dakota, O'Hare's life changed forever.

O'Hare was arrested for disobeying the Espionage Act. She was given a short trial during which the prosecutor called her “a dangerous woman.” O'Hare was found guilty. Despite the fact that she had four young children at home, O'Hare was sentenced to five years in prison.

MRS. O'HARE GETS FIVE YEARS FOR  
OPPOSITION TO NATION'S PLANS  
Socialist Agitator Who Opposes  
Enlistment Goes To Federal Penitentiary  
PRAISES LEAGUE IN LONG ADDRESS  
Declares It Greatest “Social Revolution” –  
Holds Herself a Martyr

*Fargo Forum*, December 15, 1917

Despite harsh conditions, O'Hare assured her family that she was all right. Across the nation Socialist newspapers demanded her release. She had these words for her Socialist supporters:

*I am deeply grateful to be where I am today and to have found such a place of service. Know that my children are secure. . . . there are so many who need me here. The poor little "dope fiend" in the cell next to me needs me more than my own do. You have love and health and the beautiful world; she has only the hellish cry of her nerves for "dope," the black despair born of neglect of those who should help her, and the gnawing hunger of a long under-nourished body.*

– Kate Richards O'Hare, "Letter from Prison," April 20, 1919

By 1920 the Socialist Party had lost three-fourths of its membership. The imprisonment of three of its leaders (O'Hare, Emma Goldman, and Eugene V. Debs) and the rise of the new Communist Labor Party contributed to the decline. O'Hare's focus gradually changed to prison reform and labor education. In 1938 O'Hare was appointed assistant director of California prisons. She helped to change the California prison system into one of the most advanced in the nation for that time.

Kate Richards O'Hare was a woman who made a difference. She summed up her contributions to society best in her speech delivered to the judge before being sentenced for disobeying the Espionage Act:

*The crime is this: "She stirred up the people." And, Your Honor, if by inference I can be charged with that crime . . . I plead guilty of that crime, if it is a crime. For twenty years I have done nothing but stir up the people. As a high school girl, . . . I did my best to stir up the people against the corruption . . . that came with the liquor traffic . . . I did all in my power to stir up the people, the working class of the United States to demand more of the wealth of this country. I did my best to stir them up to demand shorter hours and better pay and better conditions and the one great motive and object of my life has been the ambition to stir up the people of the United States to demand life, and life more abundant.*

### KATE IS OUT AGAIN

Glad of It, But Wants Citizenship Restored.

Jefferson City, Mo., May 30. – Mrs. Kate Richards O'Hare, whose sentence of five years under conviction of violation of the anti-sedition act, was commuted yesterday by President Wilson, was released from the Missouri penitentiary at noon today [after serving 14 months].

*Topeka Daily Capital*, May 31, 1920

